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ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes research on methods of student grouping in reading instruction other than whole-class instruction and ability grouping. Peer tutoring and reciprocal-role tutoring have been demonstrated to be effective for students with learning disabilities because they are allowed to be either tutors or tutees. Cross-age tutoring has been found to be particularly effective for the older tutors, including tutors with disabilities. Small learning groups (groups of three to four students) have been found to be more efficient than larger groups of five to seven students, but most of these studies have not included students with disabilities. Finally, a combination of grouping formats offers promise for teaching students with disabilities in inclusive settings. (D3)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON DISABILITIES AND GIFTED EDUCATION

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STUDENT GROUPINGS FOR READING INSTRUCTION

By

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Student Groupings for Reading Instruction

Jane Burnette

Instruction in the Inclusive Classroom

Increasing diversity in the classroom has presented teachers with the challenge of providing appropriate reading instruction for all students in their classes, who may represent a variety of ability levels and cultures. In contrast to past practices, more of today's students with disabilities are receiving reading instruction in a general education classroom instead of a special education classroom. This practice can be expected to increase, since the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides support for educating students with disabilities in the general education classroom and ensuring their right to access the general education curriculum.

Under these conditions, teachers need to know the best ways of organizing their classrooms and grouping students for instruction in order to maximize student achievement. Ability grouping, long a standard practice in reading instruction, has been criticized for lowering self-esteem and motivation among students with reading problems, and it often widens the gap between high and low achievers.

Research funded by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has identified a number of alternatives to whole-class instruction and ability grouping and provided information about their effectiveness. Such grouping formats include peer (same-age) tutoring, cross-age tutoring, small learning groups, and combined grouping formats. Some of these studies have employed meta-analysis, a way of looking at many research studies on a specified topic. The research shows that these alternative groupings produce better reading outcomes for students with and without disabilities than whole-class instruction.

Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring has repeatedly been found to be an effective method of teaching reading to students with disabilities. While one meta-analysis (Mathes & Fuchs, 1994) found that students with disabilities made greater gains in reading when they served as tutors, another (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes & Moody, 1999) found no difference between whether the students with disabilities served as tutor or tutee. Furthermore, research has shown that students with disabilities can perform effectively either as tutors or tutees, as well as in a reciprocal tutoring role. Reciprocal-role tutoring may offer an additional benefit of boosting students' self-esteem through the teaching role. Use of this technique requires an understanding of the process, organizational planning, training of tutors, and careful monitoring.

Cross-Age Tutoring

A recent meta-analysis (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, & Moody, 1999) revealed that students with disabilities derive considerable benefit from tutoring younger students. However, it shows less benefit for tutees, whether or not the tutors have disabilities. Students with disabilities who were tutored by older students did not appear to benefit academically from this type of tutoring. Using this technique requires more planning, since students tutor children who are at least one grade level lower. Like peer tutoring, this technique involves tutor training and careful monitoring to ensure that both tutors and tutees are benefiting from the tutoring.

Small Learning Groups

Small group reading instruction has been shown by many research studies to be more effective than whole-class instruction, but most of these studies did not include students with disabilities. Breaking the class into teacher-led groups of 3 to 10 students helps students learn significantly more than when they are taught using whole-class instruction. Smaller groups appear to be better—groups of 3 to 4 students are usually more efficient than larger groups of 5 to 7 students in terms of teacher and student time, lower cost, increased instructional time, increased peer interaction, and improved generalization of skills.

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This practice requires teachers to plan and organize groups and to adapt instruction, methods, and materials for small group use. Benefits are greater when the materials are tailored to the needs of different students. Students with disabilities may require different materials and more direct instruction than students without disabilities.

Combined Grouping Formats

Using a combination of formats produces measurable reading benefits for students with disabilities. For example, a teacher may use whole-class instruction for a part of each period, and have students work in pairs for 2 days and in small groups for 2 days. Although combined formats have not yet been studied extensively, they appear to offer promise for inclusive teachers and their students.

This ERIC/OSEP digest is based on the work of Batya Elbaum, Sharon Vaughn, Marie Hughes, Sally Watson Moody and Jeanne Shay Schumm. For more information, see Elbaum, B., Vaughn, S., Hughes, M., and Moody, S.W. (Spring 1999). Grouping practices and reading outcomes for students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 65(3).

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